

The Upheavals in the Middle East and Israel's Security

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The turmoil that has marked the Middle East for over six months is far greater than any upheavals in the Middle East in many decades. The purpose of this essay is neither to analyze the reasons for the upheavals nor to try to forecast their future, rather to attempt to understand their significance for Israel. Much of what is underway in the Arab countries, such as the events in Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, has virtually no effect on Israel, at least not directly. The essay, therefore, will not consider these states, and instead will analyze the events in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain (with the implications for the Gulf), and Jordan, and their effect on the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Egypt

As this article goes to press, it seems that the turmoil in Egypt has resulted in more limited change than was expected when the mass rallies were underway in Tahrir Square. Except for the sharp reversal in the fortunes of President Mubarak, not much has happened.

Egyptian public opinion, which pushed for change, had three objectives: to exact revenge from Mubarak and his family, to enjoy greater freedoms, and to improve the economic situation. The current military government is quite happy to fulfill the first objective (revenge); is happy to make promises it has little intention of keeping regarding the second (true freedom and democracy); and can't even promise, let alone ensure, the third – a better economic future.

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Indeed, the economy will apparently be the primary challenge facing the current regime (or the one that succeeds it). The Egyptian economy depends on a number of factors directly or indirectly associated with Israel, among them tourism (including tourism to the Sinai Peninsula); export of natural gas; revenue from the Suez Canal; and American economic and military assistance. The Egyptian regime will not readily forego the opportunity to maximize revenue from those four sources. It will not risk abrogating the peace treaty with Israel, if only from purely economic considerations, especially if it does not want to risk the cancellation of the billion dollar debt that President Obama promised Egypt or the continued military assistance valued at \$1.3 billion a year.

In other words, Israel can assume that there will be no dramatic change in the political and economic relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the security dimension. Looser Egyptian control over the Sinai Peninsula is already evident. As long as the situation entails arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip, individuals infiltrating into Israel from Sinai, and even the danger of terrorist attacks

in Egypt, the situation from Israel's perspective has gotten worse. At the same time, these concerns remain at the tactical level.

The more essential issue relates to the working assumption that prevailed over the last 32 years, namely that there was no plausible scenario envisioning a military confrontation with Egypt. This allowed Israel to conduct two wars in Lebanon and undertake two large scale operations in Palestinian territory (Defensive Shield in 2002 and Cast Lead in 2008-9), knowing that Egypt would not respond militarily. Moreover, in real terms the Israeli military budget has remained more or less constant since 1974. Yet because the GDP has grown significantly in the 37 years since then, security needs have dropped from 30 percent of the GDP in 1974 to less than 7 percent in 2010.

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The security burden is still high by European standards, but its dramatic reduction in this period is one of the primary reasons the Israeli economy has flourished.

Over the last 32 years, the security establishment has stressed – within itself and to the political level – that the working assumption that there would be no military confrontation with Egypt in the near future is valid only until “a strategic change” there is evident. The critical question, then, is: do the events that have taken place in Egypt in recent months constitute a strategic change that obligates Israel to reexamine its security budget in terms of scope and composition? This applies particularly to the two most expensive components: the size of the fighting force (at sea, in the air, and on land) and the stockpiles of arms, spare parts, and fuel. Some answer to this question is due in the near future in the context of the IDF multi-year Halamish plan. Should it be decided to increase the defense budget significantly, this will likely slow down Israel’s economic growth.

In my estimation, there is currently no need to alter fundamental assumptions regarding Egypt. Even if Egyptian policy towards Israel becomes more hostile and a militant government that does not rule out a military confrontation rises to power, the time it will take Egypt to translate this new approach into a real threat and the hurdles such a government would have to face (such as writing off American military aid) would give Israel sufficient time to adjust to this new situation.

Syria

The unrest in Syria escalates by the week, though it is still impossible to assert definitively that the Asad era is over. Israel cannot (and does not want to) affect what is happening in Syria, but there is no doubt that Israel is affected by any potential outcome of the events.

The first possible scenario is that Asad remains in power for many years to come. Some in Israel feel this scenario is the most desirable, if for nothing else, as the least of all (familiar) evils. As early as 2005, Ariel Sharon already rejected various ideas that sought to take advantage of Syria’s temporary weakness, resulting from the Hariri assassination and the pressure on Damascus to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, and try to bring about Asad’s downfall. Sharon estimated that most of the alternative scenarios would be worse for Israel. Should Asad remain in power, he will be forced to put most of his efforts into reinforcing his regime domestically and bolstering his legitimacy on the global stage. Consequently, he will likely not seek a military confrontation with Israel;

he may even reduce the assistance he extends to Hezbollah. This scenario will not change Israel's basic assumptions regarding Syria, but it does mean a greater chance for continued calm along the Israeli-Syrian border.

In a second scenario, Asad's regime falls and Syria begins a long period of instability and internal struggles. Such instability, while weakening Syria, could strengthen Iran's influence in the country and increase the possibility of provocations against Israel by various groups. In this scenario, the military threat from Syria will not increase. In fact, it may even decline, though calm along the border will be less certain.

The third scenario posits the rise of a Sunni regime with more militant anti-Israel stances. Such a regime is liable to lose some of the Iranian support Syria currently receives (depending on the policy this regime would adopt vis-à-vis the tension between Iran and the Sunni states in the Persian Gulf) but it is also liable to risk a more aggressive attitude towards Israel and attempt to restore the Golan Heights to Syria by force, something that Bashar Asad the "infidel" was afraid to do, or at least loosen the hold on anti-Israel moves (by al-Qaeda?) along Israel's northern border.

According to a fourth scenario, Syria will stabilize under a more or less democratic regime with a clear pro-Western orientation. There is no doubt that this would constitute bad news from Iran's point of view and worse still for Hezbollah, but this would not necessarily translate into willingness to sign a peace treaty with Israel. It is obvious that the safest stance for any Arab regime is a hostile position toward Israel. Still, such a scenario would certainly encourage various international elements to exert pressure both on Israel and on whatever new regime emerges to conduct negotiations over a peace treaty (and the return of the Golan Heights). Would this be an auspicious development for Israel? In his day, Sharon thought the answer was no, but others may think differently.

The bottom line is that the developments in Syria and the possible scenarios there do not worsen Israel's situation, if only for the simple reason that the current basic assumption (that sees potential for war at any moment) is sufficiently threatening, and any changes may be for the better.

Lebanon

Lebanon is affected by what happens in Syria but also operates according to its own internal logic. It seems that Hezbollah now has more reason to worry about its internal legitimacy in Lebanon. The first reason is its identification with the Syrian regime, a patently unpopular stance at the moment in the Arab world, including Lebanon. Second, Hezbollah too understands that today's revolutionary spirit in the Arab street does not support its ideological line, rather the opposite: no demonstration in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, or Syria trumpets the example of the 1979 Shiite Islamic Revolution in Iran or any other component of Hezbollah or Hamas ideology. It seems that fewer and fewer Lebanese accept the organization's self-definition as "the resistance," i.e., Lebanon's shield against Israeli aggression. Furthermore, Nasrallah's call to overrun Israel's borders with millions of protesters from different Arab states remains an empty threat for now. In other words, the restraining elements currently appear stronger than they were six months ago. Intra-Lebanese legitimacy is very important for Hezbollah, and it will thus likely try to avoid a direct confrontation with Israel in the foreseeable future.

The opposite – and less likely – scenario is that Syrian pressure to divert attention away from events in Syria will convince Hezbollah (and Iran) to renew the provocations on the Israeli-Lebanese border. In a broader sense, the uncertainty in Syria might also have ramifications for instability in Lebanon; this, however, is a less likely scenario.

Bahrain

In contrast to the five other entities discussed here, all of which involve a border with Israel, Bahrain is far away. Nevertheless, what happens there is liable to have a significant impact on Israel. Bahrain is a small state (twice the size of the Gaza Strip) located on the Saudi side of the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, it has a clear pro-American orientation: one of the most important United States bases in the Gulf is located in Bahrain. On the other hand, this is a state in which the Shiite majority is oppressed by a Sunni minority-ruled monarchy.

If in the long term the Arab world becomes democratic, it will be easier for Israel to find acceptance in the region as a nation of equal rights, and thus also resolve the extended conflict with Syria and the Palestinians.

When the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt erupted, they spread to Bahrain as well. Iran identified the potential: despite an attempt to keep a low profile, it incited the Shiites to take to the streets to demand freedom and democracy. There were moments in which the regime appeared on the verge of collapse, but Iran was not alone in grasping the regional significance of such an event. It was also understood by the Sunni states in the Gulf, primarily Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, which for decades has presented as a cautious and at times even passive nation, hurried (though not for the first time) to send military forces to help the Bahraini government put down the revolt. Its motivation was clear: 15 percent of Saudi Arabia's population is Shiite, a community that lives in the wealthiest part of the oil-producing world yet is the only sector not enjoying any of the riches. A Shiite uprising in Bahrain could have let the Shiite genie out of the bottle in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia understood that maintaining the status quo in Bahrain was a prime Saudi national interest; this was also true of Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE. Currently the score in Bahrain is tied (both in terms of the internal circle within the state and in terms of a conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia), but it is safe to assume that if the situation there changes, especially if a pro-Iranian Shiite regime takes power, it would have major regional ramifications. In light of the anticipated American withdrawal from Iraq, it appears that Iran is poised to attempt to expand its influence in the Gulf, while the Sunni states in the Gulf (along with Jordan) are joining forces to block it.

The ramifications for Israel are indirect. The expansion of Iranian influence in Bahrain and even more so in Iraq can have implications for stability in Jordan. In addition, any move that creates the impression of an American defeat simply adds to Iran's feeling of empowerment on every level, including its nuclear aspirations.

Jordan

Thus far the situation in Jordan has remained stable. To date, all the revolts that succeeded or seem poised for success (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria) have occurred in states without a monarchy. Surprisingly, the kings – including the King of Jordan – are maintaining impressive stability.

Yet despite the stability to date, Jordan is a factor in this discussion for three reasons. First, Jordan too has been subject in recent months to unprecedented criticism of the royal household (with the Queen as the specific target). Second, the anticipated American withdrawal from Iraq in 2012 is liable to cause shockwaves in Jordan. Third and most important is the implication for Israel should there be a revolt in Jordan, similar to that regarding Egypt in terms of the no-war assumption, but it could be much more severe in terms of the calm and security and civilian cooperation along the border. For decades (even before the signing of the peace treaty with Jordan), Israel's longest border was also its calmest and most secure. A regime change in Jordan would require Israel to allocate vast resources to improve preparedness along that border.

On the other hand, a democratic revolution in Jordan placing the Palestinian majority in control of the government could cast a whole new light on the Palestinian issue and suggest an entirely new model for resolving the conflict.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a logic (or illogic) of its own. The impact of the recent events in the Arab world on the conflict is slight.

The primary question is: can the formula presented by President Clinton in late 2000 be acceptable to both sides? For now, the answer seems to be no. Do the events in the Arab world have the power to change the situation? For now, there is little positive evidence of this. This may change for the better if and when the states around Israel become true democracies, if the threat of Islamic hegemony as a replacement for secular dictatorships disappears, if Iran's influence on the region weakens, and if the Arab nations truly wish to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If there is a new Arab initiative that would call for recognizing Israel not only upon its return to the 1967 borders (including the Golan Heights) but already in the course of the process, it may be that voices within Israel calling for a move that would strengthen it strategically – despite the many tactical risks – would grow stronger. Alternatively, a regime change in Jordan is likely to create opportunities in a different direction. Until such events take place, however, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an issue unto itself.

Conclusion

The general significance of the change currently underway in the Arab world is not yet clear. As of now, the effect on Israel is limited and indirect.

Alongside the increased risks inherent in the instability and the adoption of less friendly attitudes towards Israel (Egypt), there are also opportunities (e.g., weakening Iran's influence in Syria and Lebanon, strengthening the anti-Iranian coalition in the Gulf). In the long term, there is no doubt that should the Arab world become democratic (elections alone do not make a state into a democracy), it would be easier for Israel to find acceptance in the region as a nation of equal rights and thus also resolve the extended conflict with Syria and the Palestinians.

A change that is already apparent is the reduced importance of Egypt and Syria, which in any scenario will be very engaged in internal matters, leaving the stage for Turkey and Saudi Arabia to expand their influence. Erdogan is proving – not only because of his success in the recent elections – that unlike the passive West, he is reacting to the events. He takes the initiative and is not afraid to take a stand against states that only recently were friends (first Israel and now Syria). Saudi Arabia, after decades of passivity and reliance on the United States to solve its problems, is now assuming the role of regional leader. It may be that with sound diplomacy Israel can achieve greater normalization with Turkey and perhaps create some type of cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Even the pressure experienced by Hezbollah at present, which may grow if Asad's regime collapses, may afford Israel an opportunity to reach more stable security arrangements with Lebanon.

With regard to the size of the defense budget and its composition, certain changes are already in order as a result of the uncertainty in Egypt, though such changes need not be dramatic at this point. In any event, more attention must be given by the IDF to its confrontation with civilians. As has become increasingly evident, this is relevant not only with regard to the Gaza Strip and West Bank, but also with regard to the naval arena and the borders with Syria and Lebanon.